

Bill would reduce K-12 class sizes, add staff

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The Olympian

January 23, 2014 Updated 18 hours ago



(Steve Bloom/staff photographer) STEVE BLOOM — The Olympian

OLYMPIA, Wash. — A bill introduced in the House this week would lower class sizes in Washington public schools and help encourage the hiring of more teachers and other staff members.

Rep. Roger Goodman, sponsor of House Bill 2589, said Thursday that the goal is to make class size reduction a priority as the Legislature adds dollars to the education budget as mandated by the Washington Supreme Court.

"Reducing class size is the right thing to do and it's time to do it," Goodman said.

The Supreme Court ruled in 2012 that the state isn't meeting its constitutional obligation to amply pay for basic education. In response, the Legislature added about \$1 billion to education funding last year. Lawmakers and other governmental officials estimate the full cost of closing the education funding gap would be between \$4 billion and \$5 billion.

The bill would increase school staffing levels each year, with a priority on adding teachers to high poverty schools. The proposal seeks a general goal of 17 students in the early grades and 25 in grades four through 12. Lower teacher-student ratios would be sought in high-poverty schools.

Elementary grades averaged about 23 children per classroom in Washington state during the 2011-12 school year, according to statistics from the National Education Association.

Katherine Jones, a parent of two students in Renton schools, said last year, her son's fifth-grade class had 29 students and that the classroom environment was often chaotic.

"I worry about my childrens' ability to compete in the world," she said. "I shouldn't have to."

Mary Howes with Class Size Counts, a statewide organization of parents, teachers, students and community members advocating for smaller class sizes, said Washington state ranks 47th out of 50 states in class size, according to statistics from the National Education Association.

"Forty-seventh in the nation isn't good enough for our kids," said Sen. Marko Liias, D-Mukilteo. Liias filed a companion bill in the Senate on Thursday.

Goodman says money for the measure has not been identified yet, but it would be included in the funding needed to abide by the Supreme Court's ruling, known as the McCleary decision. However, the decision talked about finding money to lower class sizes in kindergarten through third grade. It will cost considerably more to make all classes smaller.

Liias said students at all grade levels can benefit from "small class sizes."

Although Howes, Goodman and Liias cited studies in which students in smaller classes performed better academically, research on the impact is not clear.

A study in Tennessee in the late 1980s found that a large reduction in class sizes — averaging 7 students — increased student achievement by the equivalent of adding 3 months to the school year over time. Other studies, including one in Texas, have found positive but not dramatic effects when smaller reductions were made. Studies in California, Florida and Connecticut had mixed results, according to a research summary by the Brookings Institute.

Researchers at the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education point out the high cost of this kind of reform, which can require schools to hire more teachers and build more classrooms. In a December 2012 report by Marguerite Roza and Monica Oujdani, the UW researchers suggest there more effective ways, such as lengthening the school day.

The state Supreme Court set a 2018 deadline for fixing the way Washington pays for education.

AP reporter Donna Blankinship contributed to this story from Seattle.

Read more here: <http://www.theolympian.com/2014/01/23/2945494/bill-would-reduce-wa-k-12-class.html#storylink=cpy>